"As a Man Sows"

By Helen Wallace
Author of "The Greatest of These," "Their Hearts' Desire," Etc.

SYNOPSIS.

Isobel Stormont, daughter of Sir David Stormont, a wealthy Scotch country gentleman disappears without leaving the slightest trace. She was a quiet, retiring girl, with only one distinguishing feature—beautiful Titian hair, which had been a mark of the Stormont family for generations. Her fiance, Basil Conyers, comes from London to aid in the search for her, and finally receives intelligence that a girl answering to her description has been seen with a band of gypsies.

CHAPTER III—(Continued).

She spoke with a strong cockney accent, and was likely only one of a company of wandering vagrants, without a trace of the old Romany blood or dialect.

"You can tell me all I want to know without that, although here's the means to do it," said Conyers, showing a coin. "Is a—a red-haired girl," using the landlady's description, "who was with you in the village yesterday still here?" In spite of himself, his breath came a little quicker, as he waited for the answer.

The woman peered doubtfully through the drifting smoke at the tall figure, and though her eyes fastened greedily on the gleam of silver in his hand, her face settled to a look of low, doubtful cunning. Men of Conyers 'stamp did not visit a hawker's camp for nothing. What could he want?

"A red-haired girl?" she said, as if considering.

"Yes, the one who was with you in the village yesterday," said Conyers, impatiently. "You need not be afraid to speak. I'm neither a policeman nor a health inspector. I don't mean you any harm. Is she still here? Has she been long with you? Can you tell me anything about her?"

"Not much, sir. She's a bit touched in the 'ead, I think. We came on her by the roadside two or three days ago. She was a-sittin' lookin' at 'er 'ands, as you would say, and when we come up she hout with some lingo, but the only word of sense in it was 'Duncaird.' 'We're for Duncaird, too,' says I, but she sits still and falls a-starin' again; but hafter a bit we sees 'er follerin', and when by night she made up with us, she got the bit and the sup with the kids and a corner to lie in; more than many would 'a' done, sir, for, Gord knows, the pore gypsy 'as little enough to go round, and she might 'ave 'ad the fivver or the smallpox, and where would we 'ave bin?" said the woman, readily enough, but with a wheedling tone in the thick, throaty voice. She had shown the charity of the wretched to one even more miserable, but if this fine gentleman was interested in the "softy," why, then, he might as well know what she had done for her.

"Then, where is she?" asked Conyers, with a glance toward the tents, from the black mouths of which, in spite of the eddying gusts of moorland wind, came the reek of close-packed, unwashed humanity.

"Wish I knew, sir, if it's hanythink to you. You see, it was this wye. She never said a Christian word hall the time but Duncaird. Was she in a 'urry there? We ast 'er; but there, it was no good, we could make nothink hout of 'er, though 'er jabber was more like a babby tryin' to speak than a furrin' lingo, though Gord knows it might 'ave been that. But this was a pore day for trampin', and one o' the 'osses lame, and one o' the kids sick, which it's an 'ard life, sir, and when we didn't take the road she hup and hoff without a 'by your leave,' or a 'thank ye,' and, o' course, we couldn't stop 'er."

"And where did she go?" asked Conyers, eagerly.

He must see this out. Likely it was only a case for the casual ward, but suppose that Isobel had wandered away, or had in some fashion been decoyed away; such things had happened. She might have been trying to find her way home again, and such an experience might well rob her for a time of speech or memory, save for some stray word. Then he checked his galloping fancy by another glance round the encampment, and at the woman's coarse, weather-beaten face. Impossible, said common sense again, but this time, in a less absolute tone.

"Hout the road, sir, but I can't think she could 'ave the strength to go far—which I'd 'ave kep' 'er if I could, sir, but, bless yer, she was hoff, as I says, like a shadder, but there's 'ardly an 'ouse for miles, and wot's to 'appen to the pore thing—eh, God bless ye, sir, for a kind 'eart and a noble gent; there's precious few think's o' the pore gypsy. May ye 'ave the grand fortune and hall ye want to come to 'appen."

The rest was lost in a rising shiek of the gale, as, thrusting some silver into the woman's ready hand, Conyers turned away, and, stooping against the wind, splashed along the road, which, gradually ascending the shallow glen, stretched far before him, a long, straight, yellow streak.

"All you want come to happen," the wind whistling by sang the words in his ears. A comprehensive enough benediction, surely. Well, he must find this girl—beyond that, he would not look. If only she had kept to the road it would be easy enough; any moving speck upon all its empty length could be seen a mile off, so long as the light lasted. But if she had left it? He cast a doubtful eye over the waste of bog and heather, where here and there a sullen peaty pool glimmered wan in the fast-fading light. The trap overtook him, and he bade the driver go slowly, while he keenly scanned every clump of stunted bushes on the lee side of some hoary projecting bowlder.

"There are some houses yonder!" he exclaimed, after a while, with an upleap of hope, seeing through the thickening dusk some low gray gables on a slope a little way above the road.

"What was hooses," said the driver, rather grimly. "Weel I mind the day when there were bien folk and warm fireends yonder, but there's neither roof nor fire left in Achnagole."

A few minutes showed that the poor dwellings were little more than rough heaps of stones. In one or two of them the smoke-blackened "cabers" or rafters still showed gaunt and skeleton-like against the sky, and supported some fragments of shaggy thatch, but a "black hut," which seems as akin to the soil as an outcroping boulder, soon sinks back to it, if once abandoned to the weather.

"Stop!" said Basil, suddenly. "I'll go up and take a look round."

In a little, Basil struck the rutted track which led to the ruined village. Reason, common-sense, possibility were flung to the winds now—in spite of them all, conviction had sprung to fierce and sudden life, and had him in its grip. It was no longer some poor waif whom he was seeking, and whom he would rescue, if he could, for common humanity's sake, but Isobel, his little cousin, who, God knew why, was wandering alone and forlorn in this friendless wilderness, with no refuge for her weary feet, no shelter for her fair head from the night and storm—Isobel, lost and bewildered, yet vainly seeking her home with but one pitiful word upon her lips.

He set his teeth hard as he breasted the steep slope. She might have hoped to find some shelter among these tottering walls. It was the last frail chance, and he knew it. He was among the ruined houses now. One after another he searched within and without, but there was no sign of life, not even a nibbling sheep. Nettles breast high choked the roofless interiors, no human foot had crossed their thresholds for many a day. Despair clutched him as he stood amid these forsaken dwellings—a desolation deeper than the dread emptiness of the wide moors. He fairly trembled to enter the last, which stood a little apart from the others. If it were empty, too, if she were not there—the scourge of the wind, the loom of the clouds was answer enough. Then he vaulted the low, crumbling wall which surrounded it, and made one stride to the door.

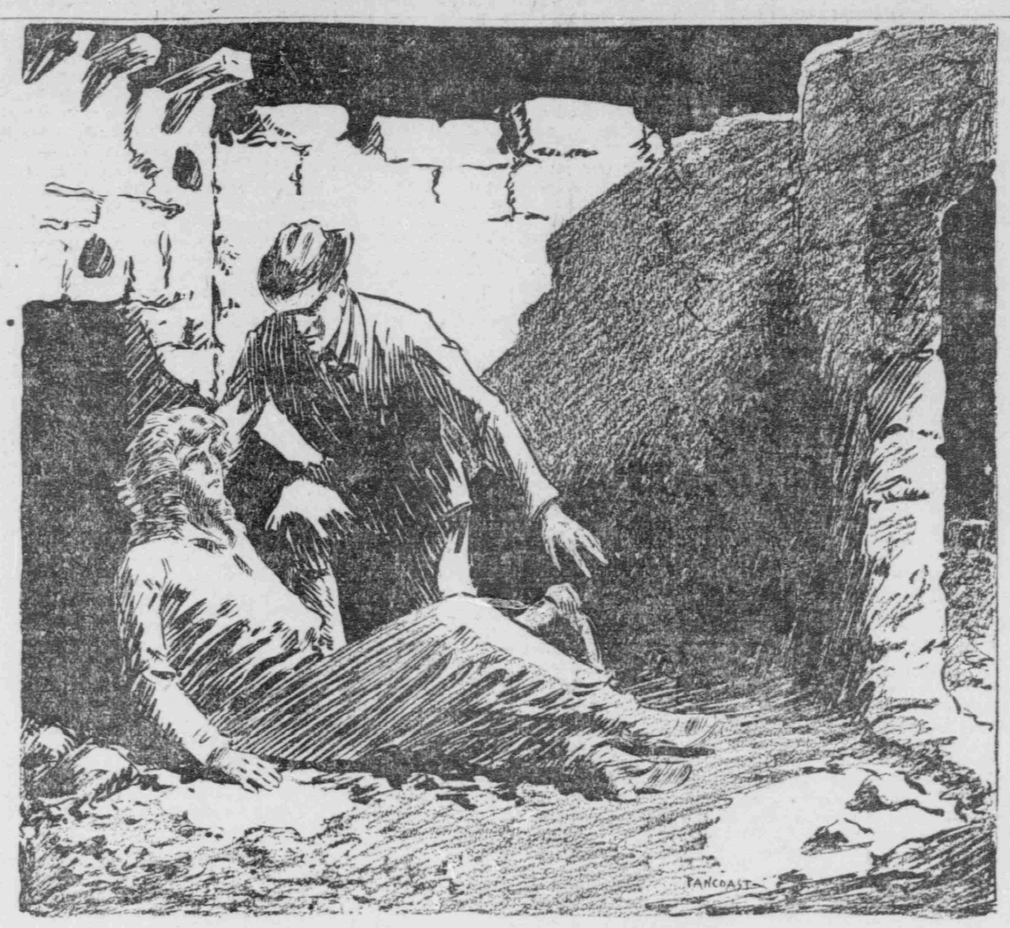
Within it seemed dark as a cave, for the wind had not yet stripped it to the bone—the ragged thatch still clung about the roof-tree. On the threshold he paused. Above the wind he heard, his heart murmur loud, and the sullen drip, drip of the rain in the puddles on the clay floor. With a long breath he stepped into the foul blackness, feeling for his matches, when suddenly the darkness lighted. The wind had torn a huge rent in the cloud roof, and through the gap, a white wisp of a crescent moon looked down, wan and mournful.

The pale, cheerless light stole in through the broken roof, showing with chill, unsparing distinctness the rough, naked walls, the slimy floor, the yawning cavity of the chimney, and there on the cold hearthstone—Conyers' hand paused midway, his breath stopped for a moment—was a dark heap—a reddish gleam!

The hovel was not empty, then, like the others; but a new dread like a leaden weight made his step heavy, his brow damp, as he advanced and stooped over the huddled figure. With unsteady hands he gently raised the fallen head, and parted the ruddy mass of hair, streaming loose like sea-tangle cast up by the waves.

A little oval face, white as the cotton grass waving on every bog, looked out on him, the fixed, unseeing eyes turned, as if in vain, pitiful appeal to the blank, unheeding heavens. From the parted bluish lips came a faint, sighing breath.

"Isobel!" he cried, aloud.



With unsteady hands he gently raised the fallen head.

CHAPTER IV.

The Home-coming.

To his last conscious breath, Basil Conyers would remember that moment, and the wild night drive which followed. Even as he had stumbled down the rough track with his light burden—pitifully light—in his arms, he had swiftly debated on his wisest course. She needed shelter, warmth, every care, and yet to take her back to the scanty comfort of the village inn seemed a doubtful proceeding; better push on to Duncaird; or why not risk the remaining distance and take her home! And the thought of what that home-coming would mean made the young man's usually cool, equable brain well-nigh swim. He was intoxicated by his amazing, his impossible triumph. Even the stolid driver caught fire from Basil's suppressed excitement, and sent his horse along the climbing road at a pace which had never been exacted from that worthy animal before.

A mile upon their way the storm leaped upon them again. The sky was one cloud, the wind raved down from the lonely hills, the rain hissed in their faces and churned upon the gravelly road, while ever and again the far-spreading moors were sheeted in blue spectral light, and the voice of the thunder lent its deeper note to the fierce cry of the wind. The turmoil around only fed Conyers' exultation. He could have shouted and sung as they strove against the wind.

A gleam of lamps on wet pavements—Duncaird, at last, which meant warm, dry wraps for the unconscious girl, a closed carriage, and fresh horses, the services of a doctor who had known her from childhood, and whom Conyers carried off with them, and not least—a moment to flash the amazing news to Stormont. In the quiet old town the story spread like wildfire, and the deserted streets awoke, windows opened, lights sprang up, and the carriage rolled away amid a running fire of cheers.

And now every swift roll of the wheels was bringing them nearer and nearer to that home-coming which Conyers had been picturing through all the dark hours. Yet from the moment that the blaze of light from the great arched doorway dazzled his eyes, it was all like a dream, a dream of crowding faces, of smiles, sobs, tears, and broken words, for convention and discipline had been forgotten for the moment, and the whole household had thronged into the great hall to see Miss Isobel brought home.

As Conyers stepped in from the darkness without, his head high, his eyes alight, the girl in his arms, her slight figure swathed in a great crimson wrap, her head upon his breast, and the warm glory of her hair overflowing his shoulders, the men broke into a cheer, and the younger women burst into loud, hysterical crying.

Amid it all Conyers was conscious that some one was wringing his hand, till, as he found out afterward, the bones ached, while from a blur of light a face appeared, transfigured from its gracious comeliness by mother-joy and mother-love to an angel-beauty, as Lady Stormont bent over the waxen face on his breast, uttering broken, inarticulate sounds of pity and tenderness like the brooding note of a mating dove. As she stooped over the still unconscious girl her yearning love seemed to awaken some instinctive response, to touch one of nature's chords which lie deeper than sense or sight, for a quiver passed over the pallid face, the long eyelashes, like the delicate arching brows, a shade darker than her hair, slowly lifted from the wan, sunken cheeks. She looked, wonderingly, up to the bosses and carving of the vaulted roof, and round at the old walls hung with the portraits of the men and women of her race, and decked with the armor and weapons which long-dead Stormonts had carried into many a well-fought field. Then she slightly turned her head, and her wandering gaze met Basil's and held it. A sudden light leaped into the great limpid eyes, a slight tremor passed through the slim body resting in his arms, while through the young man's every fiber there went a shock, a thrill, so swift, so keen-edged, that he could not have told whether it were pain or rapture. That gaze did not last a breath's length, but while it lasted, and to Conyers it might have been years or moments, it seemed to sunder him and Isobel from all the eager crowd about them, to set them more apart than even they had been when speeding over the hills in the black, empty night. Then the light failed, her head sunk back again.

"Where am I?" she asked, faintly, but quite distinctly.

"You are at home, my darling, safe at home again, thank God!" said Lady Stormont, stooping nearer, and feeling that the sight of her face would surely dispel all wandering fears or fancies. "At home, my own child," she repeated, more urgently, as the gray eyes gazed blankly into her own.

"Home!" repeated the girl, as if the word had no meaning for her. "Where is home? Who—who are you?" gazing blankly into the eyes beaming mother-rapture into her own.

The poor mother fell back with a faint cry, as if she had been struck.

"Isobel, darling, don't you know me—me—your mother?" her voice, rising to a wail, the outward composure she had maintained so long in the face of agony, and, harder still, perhaps, under the shock of bewildering, overmastering relief and joy, breaking down pitifully under this unlooked-for blow.

Dr. Purves hurried forward.

"My dear Lady Stormont, you've set us all such a good example, you mustn't fail us now. We've cause enough to be thankful that we have got Miss Isobel home alive. The rest will follow all in good time—all in good time," soothingly, "and the first step toward it is to get her quietly to bed, and as quickly as we can. It is no wonder that the poor child is all astray, yet."

Dr. Purves, a skilled and solid, if, as some young men fresh from college and hospital might have thought, a slightly old-fashioned practitioner, knew at least the sovereign properties of "something to do" as an outlet for anxiety and overcharged feeling. Basil was relieved of his light burden, and Isobel hastily conveyed to her room, that dainty maiden bower the aching emptiness of which Lady Stormont had not dared to face for days past. The doctor soon followed, saying:

"Go and get a sleep, Mr. Conyers—you need it; and you, too, Sir David, if you'll take my advice. My news will keep till the morning, but I've every hope it will be a good report."

The two men were left alone together. They looked at each other with a faint smile.

Sleep! The young man was perhaps dimly conscious that he was at last only awakening. What had happened? He did not understand, did not even realize the change which a moment had wrought. The train had been laid during these long days of feverish anxiety and suspense, of deepening pity, of growing dread, and now the needed spark had fallen and kindled it. He vaguely felt that Isobel was no longer only his little cousin, only the girl whom he was to marry, and whom he had rescued. Beyond that he did not yet go, as he sat gazing into the glowing heart of the fire, seeing again that new light awakened in her transparent eyes, feeling again the strange, sudden thrill of their meeting glances, while Sir David walked restlessly up and down the long room.

At last, as if he could forbear no longer, the elder man paused.

"Basil, you don't know what you've done for me," he said; "I've never thanked you—"

"I don't need any thanks. It means too much to me," said Conyers, quietly.

Sir Donald laughed, harshly, strangely.

"Do you think I meant to thank you? My God, would a man thank another for lifting him out of hell? You don't know what you've done for me; you've not only given me back my child—no, no, I must speak"—as the young man tried to stay him—"you've given me back my hope in life, my hope in God—a God who will have mercy—who will forgive—not a remorseless Fate to whom repentance is nothing, amendment nothing, which visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, which tortures you through the innocent, which demands payment in kind, but defers that exaction till the poor, deluded wretch thinks he has paid in full, that he has suffered enough, that the past is past, that though he can never forgive himself, he may be forgiven—and then, and then—"

The light gray eyes under the heavy, reddish brows blazed with wild excitement, the tall figure was strung tense, the hands nervously working.

Suddenly he pulled himself together, passed his hand over his eyes with a long breath, like a man awaking.

"What was I saying, Basil? If it was nonsense, forget it. I'll be myself again soon. Life has been a horror, a nightmare these past days, but, thank God—and thanks to you—that is over."

The door opened, and Lady Stormont came swiftly and lightly in. The burden of these terrible days, which still weighed so heavily upon her husband, seemed to have fallen from her. The cruel lines which suspense and anguish had drawn upon her face were lost to sight in the radiance of a deep and pure joy.

"I came away for a moment, though I could hardly bear to leave her. She is sleeping—really sleeping," in a whisper, as if she feared to disturb that blessed sleep. "You must come and see her, David; it will do you good; and oh, Basil, what do we not owe you?" and she turned to the young man with swimming eyes and outstretched hands, and for a while there was silence, for a mighty gladness, like a great grief, makes for itself a deeper, wider channel than our poor speech can ever afford.

"I have put aside the dreadful old clothes she was wearing, poor child," said Lady Stormont, after the pregnant pause had lasted for a time, as if unconsciously she felt that emotion could not long remain at such altitudes, but must be helped back to a more normal level. "They may help us, by and by, to find out who it was befriended her, for Dr. Purves says that we must not press her with questions; that it would be better if she could forget these past days altogether for a time. I am afraid that she must have fallen into cruel hands at first, for her rings—your ring, Basil—and any little trinkets she was wearing are gone, as well as her own clothes; but I think she must somewhere have met some kind people, some good people, for see what I found in her pocket—the only thing in it, indeed. Don't laugh at me," tremulously, "but I feel as if this had been a sort of amulet, a talisman, for—for it is a mother's gift," her voice breaking in a sob of thankfulness as she held out to her husband a pocket Testament with the old-fashioned brass clasp. "See," she said, softly, showing him the flyleaf, "I feel as if some poor mother who may have lost her own child had had pity on me and mine."

On the yellowed paper was written in a feeble, pointed hand, "To my dear Elsie, on her fifth birthday, from her mother," with a date some five-and-thirty years back.

Sir David caught it from her hand with a muttered sound between a gasp and an exclamation, and stood staring at the feebly traced lines. As he did so, something white fluttered from between the leaves. Sir David made an instant snatch at it, but Conyers, at whose feet it fell, had already stooped.

"Only the corner of an old envelope," he said. "No, there's hair in it."

"The mother's hair, likely," said Lady Stormont.

"No, it's more like a man's hair," said Basil, showing a short, thick lock of reddish-fair hair, with that bleached look which hair which has been long ago cut off assumes.

"Let me see," said Sir David, taking lock and paper almost forcibly from him. "There's a postmark on the corner, isn't there? That might lead to something," said Conyers.

"No, nothing," said Sir David, hastily, in a thick, hoarse voice, putting both back between the leaves and snapping the clasp again. "I'll keep it, meantime; it may help to throw some light by and by; but, though your idea is the prettier, Marian, I am afraid it is more likely that this has been lost or forgotten long ago." His hand closed tightly over the worn little book, the difficult utterance broke off. With his free hand he caught at the back of a chair. Conyers made a hasty step forward, fearing that he might fall.

"You are ill, David; let me send for Dr. Purves," cried Lady Stormont, her own face blanching at the sight of the gray pallor which had overspread his.

"No, no," he cried, in the same choked voice, waving them both back. "Don't bother Purves; I'll be all right directly. I—I think it's the reaction. I—I'm hardly myself yet—I don't know what nonsense I've been talking to Basil," with a ghastly attempt at a smile. "I shall be better alone for a little."

And he left the hall with rapid, unsteady steps, the shabby Testament clutched tight in his hand.

CHAPTER V.

Mr. Evelyn Ashe.

"So, the 'Romance in High Life,' as the local papers call it, is nearly over, all save the last chapter and the traditional wedding bells. I suppose we can call it 'All's Well That Ends Well,' or would its time-honored variant, 'Much Ado About Nothing,' be more suitable?" said a man's voice, with the faint flavor of a sneer under its suave tones.

"And a jolly good thing, too, not only for the poor girl's sake, but perhaps we'll get a chance of a shoot over the Stormont moors now. It's a rotten shame that nobody's handled a gun on them yet but a keeper or two. What a bag one might make! There must be hundreds of birds fairly crying out to be killed," said a fresh, sunburned lad, turning over on his elbow, and gazing enviously across the valley to the rolling slopes of moor beyond, where the withered bracken, burned golden in the late August sunshine, and far away the rugged peaks of mighty Ben Vair seemed softly traced in pearly gray against the blue.

Then she slightly turned her head, and her wandering gaze met Basil's and held it.

"Well, if you call it 'nothing' for a girl to be away, goodness knows where, for nearly a fortnight, and to be unable to give any account of herself when she was picked up like a beggar on the roadside, you can, if you like. She's lost her memory very conveniently, it seems to me. Of course, we can all swallow a good deal nowadays, and Basil Conyers can perhaps swallow that for the sake of Stormont; so you may have your wedding bells, after all, Mr. Ashe," said a girl's voice, loud, vigorous, decided—Miss Vi Rudgeley's voice, whose shooting guests were now grouped upon the heather at lunch, the men lounging at ease after a good morning's work; the women trying to appear so, as far as the latest thing in garments "for the moors" would permit them.

Strictly speaking, the guests were not Miss Vi's, but those of Jonathan Rudgeley, esq., and Mr. Rudgeley, of Park street, Mayfair, of Horsley Manor, Hants, and of Balachallan, Heathshire, N. B.; but to most of the party that great commercial magnate and his spouse were little more than names. Mr. Rudgeley apparently only lived to make money—the money which had decorated the garish house in London, had turned the beautiful, old-world home of a decayed family into a showplace, and had transformed a simple Highland shooting lodge into a "Scottish baronial" castle, with as many turrets and crowsteps as the architect's ingenuity could work in—the money, in a word, which had launched Miss Vi into a society which asks few questions so long as its senses and appetites are lavishly enough pandered to. In that society Mrs. Rudgeley might have played her part, too, for she was at the age when a certain type of modern woman is at her giddiest, but she had been born in a class in which gay grandmothers do not exist, and in which the matrons retire early in favor of "the young folks," and had never been able to adapt herself to any other.

Accustomed, therefore, to rule her own family socially with a rod of iron, and having established herself as a personage in her own set, Miss Rudgeley resented the consciousness that there were still certain circles in which she could obtain no sure footing. Of course, in time-honored fashion, she declared that such society was stodgy, dull, behind the times, not worth the trouble of conquering; still, the knowledge rankled, and specially so at Balachallan, where she was always reminded of it by Lady Stormont's courteous but steady evading of her boldest advances.

The absent were not without their champions, however. Young Bob Lane was not yet so versed in the world's ways as to have learned that it is always wiser to agree with your hostess, and too honest to affect juvenile cynicism. He rolled round upon his other elbow again.

"Oh, I say, Miss Vi, you're awf'lly down on them. Conyers is an awf'lly decent chap, and the girl's a nice little thing, with not a bit of harm in her—saw her once or twice in town; and when I heard of this, I thought it a beastly shame that anything should have happened to her, that she should be dead or drowned, and nobody know anything of it—horrid, you know. I was right down glad to hear that she had turned up again."

"Of course you would, Bobby; a good child like you is sure to think what is right and proper," said Vi, patronizingly, patting the uncovered curly head. "I never said there was any harm in her; indeed, I doubt if there is anything at all in her, good or bad," shrugging her handsome shoulders. "She's 'so well brought up,' everybody says. Well, all I can say is, you men ought to be devoutly grateful that times are changed. It must have been precious dull when we were all well brought up. Thank goodness, no one can accuse me of that. I should like to have seen the mater try her hand at it," and Vi laughed again as she lit her cigarette at the glowing tip of Mr. Ashe's cigar.

"What's the truth about this Stormont affair?" he asked, taking advantage of the brief check to the torrent of Miss Vi's volubility—the only means, as a rule, of carrying on the semblance of a conversation with her. "Of course, I've seen the girl—"

"At a distance—like the rest of us," broke in Vi, with a laugh, "as we saw her picture in the crowd on Private View day. I don't suppose you were any more privileged than the rest of us. We're not good enough yet, it would appear, for Lady Stormont."

If Evelyn Ashe did not altogether relish being thus ruled out, even though it were in the company of his hostess, he was careful not to show it.

"I have merely spoken to her. Being so young and already engaged, they didn't take her about much," he said, suavely. "She struck me as being very shy and timid, though I know some people go further, and hint—"

"That she wants something of the shilling," Vi finished the sentence for him with her usual loud laugh.

Mr. Ashe found this method of getting information without committing himself to direct questions or statements a very useful one.

"Oh, no, of course not; dear Isobel, as you say, is very shy and timid," she said, rolling her fine eyes upward to the faint blue film of her cigarette smoke. "But I should like to know," sitting more erect, and speaking with sudden rancor, "what induced her to leave home in that extraordinary fashion, or, since I understand that she'd walk into the river if any one bade her do it, perhaps I should say who induced her?"

Young Lane, who had the entry into that charmed circle on the verge of which his hostess was still uneasily hovering, had been captured by a mature lady who coveted youthful homage, so that Vi could unbridle her tongue—not that she ever subjected it to much restraint.

"If I were Basil Conyers, I'd like to know that," she went on; "but perhaps he thinks it wiser not to ask too many questions; for, if he wants Stormont, he's got to take her with it—not that he needs it, for he's got plenty of his own; but that never hindered any man that ever I knew from wanting more," said Vi, shrewdly.

And how much more eagerly a man wants it if he has nothing, and how much more excuse there is for him. Evelyn Ashe may have been thinking as he lay lazily back amid the dry, springy heather and plied Miss Rudgeley with questions, which, to the limit of her knowledge, and far beyond it, she was but too ready to answer, and the story lost nothing in suggestiveness by passing through Vi Rudgeley's mind and coming from her lips.

"Why, is it time that we were making a move already?" she exclaimed, with genuine surprise and regret, as the keepers began to hustle suggestively about, and the men got up with more or less alacrity from the heather.

Ashe was one of those who lingered a little. He could afford to lose a little of that golden afternoon, for he had spent what might prove to be a most profitable hour and though the knowledge might not be very flattering to his self-love, he was conscious that by simply encouraging her ill-natured gossip and her railing against Stormont pride and Stormont exclusiveness, he had made more progress in Miss Rudgeley's good graces than by his most skillful and carefully prepared advances.

And to progress in Vi's good graces was of the utmost importance to the Hon. Evelyn Ashe—some people laid a slightly ironical emphasis on the courtesy prefix. Of the great army of those who live by their wits, the skilled practitioners devote themselves to a special class—the young, the old men or women—and it was among the last that Mr. Ashe found his subjects, and for his chosen walk in life he was well equipped. An effective personality—a tall figure, slight and graceful without being unmanly; a well-featured face, with somewhat remarkable eyes of an opaque slaty gray, which could look melting or mournful or mocking as occasion required, but which were always, as one of his fair friends dubbed them, "inscrutable," a definition which, as supplying a touch of mystery, added sensibly to his stock in trade. That hint of mystery had been judiciously heightened by vague rumors of some romance, some quixotic conduct which had hindered his advance in life. How such reports had originated it might be uncharitable to inquire, but fortunately for Mr. Ashe, "hawks do not pyke oot hawks' een," and, though a good many men despised him, and still more disliked him, those who knew did not take the trouble to disclose how baseless these floating fictions were.

In his own class he was well enough received, because of his birth and connections, while amid the great and ever-increasing army of the "nouveaux riches" and the would-be smart, he posed as an authority upon the great world, and his services were eagerly sought after as guide and adviser in its untrodden ways. Of course, his El Dorado was a wealthy marriage, but rich women are too well watched, or proved themselves, as Vi Rudgeley had yet done, much too wary and too well aware of the price they would command.

Now, as the autumn afternoon burned away in its brief glory, his thoughts were busy, though he showed his usual excellent form as a shot, not only for his own credit and pleasure, but to pay for his invitation in recognized fashion by running up the total of a big bag. Vi Rudgeley's talk, half heedless, half malicious, had suggested what appeared a very profitable opening for his special talents.

He topped a long slope, and as the wide view burst upon him, he stood still. Far away in the sunny distance he could see the great house lording it over the broad valley, and at the thought of all it implied he drew a deep breath. For a moment he let his raging fancies have full play, then cool, calculating reason pulled them up. He had better have something to go upon before he played Alnaschar; meantime the first thing was to get a footing at Stormont, and then feel his way with the girl herself.

A bird rose, though almost beyond range. He took a swift and steady aim, and as it came pitching earthward a mass of ruffled feathers which had been a thing of life a moment before, his thin but well-cut lips drew to a reflective smile, as if he had brought down more than a bird on the wing.

CHAPTER VI.

On the Terrace.

"Then she remembers nothing—nothing at all! It seems impossible. Of course, one has heard of such things, but I always thought it was story-book rot."

"So did I," said Lady Stormont, "but Dr. Purves says it is by no means uncommon, and so does Sir Hugh Weston. I did not write to you that we had had him here," as Conyers started slightly at the mention of the great brain specialist. "I thought if I did that you might fancy things were much more serious than he thinks them to be."

"He says that this loss of memory, like the loss of speech, is only temporary, and has likely been caused by some shock, a fall, perhaps, and that like the other it may soon pass. She speaks with perfect ease now, so that makes me very hopeful. But even if her memory should not return for some time, he says that we must not regret it; that it is far better that she should forget what she has passed through. It is giving her mind an absolute rest; she is making a new beginning—starting life afresh, free from all morbid fancies. I see a great change already, and I am sure it will strike you, too. But she knew no one—not even her father, nor me."

"That is hard. How does Sir David take it?"

Lady Stormont's face clouded.

"He is taking it dreadfully to heart. He can't see it, as it seems to me, that after all it is a comparatively small price to pay for a great permanent good. It was terribly strange at first. She had to be shown her way about the house and among her own little possessions as if she were the veriest stranger. Her whole life—everything—is a blank to her before that moment when she opened her eyes in the hall, but she is so grateful for kindness, for affection. It goes to my heart," the quick tears starting to her eyes, "when she thanks me for a word, or a look even, which she would never have noticed before, she was so passive often, poor child; but now it is quite different. Sometimes I say to Sir David," smiling through the unshed tears, "that if I did not know she was my Isobel I should think it some one else in her likeness. Her very voice seems a little changed, but Sir Hugh says that will soon wear off; that by some freak of memory she has retained the accent she has been hearing last, though everything else has gone, truly," with a shiver. "We are fearfully and wonderfully made; indeed, one hardly likes to think of the tricks our faculties can play us."

"But she is better—really better?"

"In health, you mean? Yes, I think she is perfectly well. I thought she would have had some terrible illness after all she must have suffered, but she reminds me of nothing so much as a child waking, fresh and happy, from a long sleep. But you would like to see her?"

"If I may; but—but she won't know me—how shall I—what shall I—"

"She knows of you, at least, and"—smiling—"I think she will guess the rest. There are other gifts besides memory—instinct, for example—with which you men are always so ready to endow us," with a laugh, "but perhaps I had better go first and tell her—"

"No—stop," putting out a detaining hand. "Unless you think it might be a shock to her, would it not be better if she were not prepared? Perhaps it might bring something back—might waken some memory."

Lady Stormont looked at him with rather a wavering smile.

"You will think it very strange of me, Basil, but I do not know if I am very anxious that the past should return to her, for a while, at least. At first it hurt me terribly that she did not know me. I felt as if some changeling had taken the place of my Isobel, and I fear that that is what Sir David is still feeling; but now when I see her so sweet and happy I can hardly bear to disturb her peace. However," with a sigh, "perhaps we ought to try; you will find her on the south terrace."

"Don't be afraid, I'll be very cautious!" And with a reassuring nod Conyers turned and hastily left the room.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY.